

Abstract

György Kurtág (b. 1926) is a composer whose concern with fragmentation runs deep into individual pieces, whilst seeming to splinter his oeuvre. His relatively select number of works includes many that manifestly deal with the notion of 'the fragment': the pinnacle of these is his Op. 24, *Kafka Fragments* (1985–1986). Memory and time play an important role in a listener's understanding of this work, as the music is woven together by temporally-dislocated connections and timeless associations. Perceptual, analytical and compositional precedents are taken as a starting point for creating a framework in which the notion of fragmentation in Kurtág's music might be understood.

Keywords: [Kurtág](#), [Analysis](#), [Time](#), [Memory](#), [Fragments](#), [Nonlinear](#)

Fragments and Remnants

A shard of pottery, a scrap of canvas, an unfinished piece of music: faced with fragments and remnants, I will wonder what they originally formed a part of. When I listen to a work in which each movement is *intentionally* a fragment, I have a few more things to ask. Are these unfinished fragments? Do they relate to each other? Are they fragments of the same thing or different things? David Metzger makes the crucial distinction between two types of fragment: the remnant is a part from an original whole—the pottery—whilst the invented fragment is something designed to seem like a fragment—the piece of music (Metzger, [2011](#) Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 105). Different terms can be used, but whatever we call them, these created, invented, composed fragments need some degree of piecing together. Memory plays an important role in this process, as traditional linear relationships take a back seat and we are required to work the jigsaw out ourselves.

One may assume that a remnant will reflect the characteristics of its original source: if the whole pot was terracotta, the shard will be too. Similarly, if we take even a half-minute section of a musical work, localised characteristics will point to the composer and genre. In both cases, the recognition of an absent whole is crucial to their identities as fragments. With our invented fragments, things are quite different. Stylistically we will be able to distinguish a fragment work by Birtwistle from one by Nono, but we will not be pointed in the direction of an extant whole; however, their shared conception as fragments may produce similar characteristics. They sound like fragments not because they lack their full context, but because they contain the hint of something larger that cannot be reached.

The new fragment, though, does not always have to mimic the old. Fragments can be invented that neither survive nor resemble a previous complete work. They are fragments of nothing. Their origins lie in the idea of the fragment, particularly the notions of incompleteness, loss, and vagueness. One way to partake in those qualities is to produce brief and enigmatic works. In other words, one can create a fragment to get all the effects created by fragments.

(Metzger, [2011](#) Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., pp. 105–106)

A musical work using fragmentation will rarely sound as if its constituent parts have been taken from somewhere else, and whilst it may have been conceived with the idea of expressing the fragmentary, its presentation as a finished work suggests completeness. By extension, a complete work is likely to demonstrate some unity, yet it purports to be fragmented—the title or the short durations of its sections tells us so. So we find a set of tensions, even contradictions, that lie at the heart of the musical fragment: completeness versus incompleteness, unity versus disunity and the whole versus the part. In a work constructed of fragments, how a listener finds their way through

the music can affect their perception of its form, the treatment of time on a micro and macro level being vitally important in gaining a sense of integration. In György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* ([1987](#)Kurtág, G. (1987). *Kafka-Fragmente*, Op. 24 (score). Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest.), temporally-dislocated associations see musical integration taking the form of a web of connections as memory plays a fundamental part in constructing musical meaning. Formal concerns relate more to proportions than to strict structural relationships, whilst subsections demonstrate surprising levels of horizontal continuity. Kurtág's music reconciles fragmentation with large-scale unity not autonomously, but when a listener engages with it. Understanding this music is contingent on memory and as a result, time plays a crucial role.

Defining the Fragment

A musical fragment has its own qualities that set it apart not only from the remnant (the true fragment), but also from other forms of ephemerality. Miniatures, aphorisms and fragments are seemingly synonymous sub-categories of brevity; they are in fact quite distinct, their relationships with form and time being palpably different. The most crucial contrast is that between the fragment and the miniature. Whilst the fragment professes to be related to something larger, the miniature *is* something larger. It entails rounded completeness that can be understood without extrinsic reference; moreover, it can take on a pre-existing form, shrink its parts, and keep proportions and relationships intact. This is the style of brevity we associate with the music of Webern. Conversely, the fragment takes a rarefied element and investigates its intrinsic properties looking for detail in the microscopic whilst maintaining a relationship with a notional whole. The fragment is the torn part of a life-size portrait; the miniature, a painting in a tiny locket.

The aphorism is, by definition, more difficult to pin down, and whilst a fragment or miniature may be aphoristic, an aphorism holds values of its own. As Metzger notes, Nono was sure of the difference, writing in his sketches for *Fragmente-Stille* 'Fragments Not Aphoristic!!!'

([2011](#)Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 112). It may demonstrate the self-containedness of the miniature or the ambiguity of the fragment, but like the literary aphorism—which harbours a single pearl of universal truth—it shows an end result with no intricate discourse. A miniature might employ a refined sonata form to place two themes in dialogue, whilst the aphorism would put contrasting ideas side-by-side so that they may inform each other, or even use a musical scheme to work out the 'truth put forth by the aphorism' (Metzger, [2011](#)Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 128). Whilst the miniature and aphorism each represent a kind of statement—whether it is upheld or upended¹ Metzger writes of the disruption or reversal of a truth present in an aphoristic statement seen in movements of *Kafka Fragments* ([2011](#)Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 128).[View all notes](#)—the fragment is more open-ended.

Precedents and Context

The pigeonholing effect of definitions can only get us so far, and whilst a composer may call a work 'fragment' this is not to say it is not miniature or aphoristic. To attempt to shed more light on the relationship musical fragments have with form and time, the ideas are best considered together, alongside several analytical approaches which may usefully be synthesised to aid the investigation.

In a broadly Schenkerian paradigm, it is understood that to appreciate a work we must perceive its global relationships, which see elements logically progress from one to the next: the music sets off

from the beginning and the end is only reached once such a journey has taken place. This top-down approach to musical time is not necessarily reflected in a collection of fragments.² Some modernist composers have taken this approach on board in their music: Taruskin comments, in relation to the Schenkerian method, 'composers trained to analyze that way might try to reconceptualize [the analysis] in composing' (2005). Taruskin, R. (2005). *The Oxford history of western music (Vol. 5)*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press., p. 512). [View all notes](#) as relationships are nonlinear resulting in a disjointed collage, not a unified picture. Jerrold Levinson dismisses this approach, favouring instead a moment-by-moment model that sees us understanding the present in relation to the immediately previous and the very next (Taruskin, 2005). Taruskin, R. (2005). *The Oxford history of western music (Vol. 5)*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press., pp. 511–513). This 'concatenationist' approach remains linear, but rejects the large scale: we know where we are and the last turning we took, but are unable to draw a route on a map once we reach the end. Unlike Schenker, Levinson's approach requires no 'reflective or intellectual awareness of musical architecture or large-scale musical structuring' (Levinson, 1997). Levinson, J. (1997). *Music in the moment*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press., p. xi).³ Taruskin provides a succinct explanation of these ideas, distilled from Levinson (2006). [View all notes](#) In this model, memory is of minimal importance as connections are only made locally.

Like Levinson, Robert Fink (1999). Fink, R. (1999). Going flat: Post-hierarchical music theory and the musical surface. In N. Cook & M. Everist (Eds.), *Rethinking music* (pp. 102–137). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.) is opposed to the surface-depth paradigm fundamental to Schenker, arguing that its inability to explain much twentieth-century music suggests it is problematic, even foolish, to discuss music in this way. Even in works that are distinctly not modernist, the idea of depth has lost much meaning.⁴ Fink (1999). Fink, R. (1999). Going flat: Post-hierarchical music theory and the musical surface. In N. Cook & M. Everist (Eds.), *Rethinking music* (pp. 102–137). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.) comments: After tonality, a tonal surface, however well-behaved, can never again have the inevitability of 'natural law', and thus can never again give the impression of following necessarily from a single, fundamental, deep structure. (You can induce Pandora to close her box again—but I wouldn't turn my back on her for a minute.) (p. 131) [View all notes](#) Fink (1999). Fink, R. (1999). Going flat: Post-hierarchical music theory and the musical surface. In N. Cook & M. Everist (Eds.), *Rethinking music* (pp. 102–137). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.) goes further, suggesting that the surface should not simply be disregarded as unsophisticated, but should be embraced: 'I perceive (and value!) a Beethoven symphony as exciting, disorganized, and all surface' (p. 137). Localised changes over a small space of time are crucial in a fragmented work.

Embracing fragment movements as pure foreground will help in some ways, but more important is how we move between them. In relation to Berio's *Sinfonia*, Fink notes, 'the generative process that Schenker saw moving from background to foreground in a single work now leaps, promiscuously from work to work—and always from foreground to foreground' (p. 129). This idea of leaping can be extended to demonstrate links between connected movements in a fragment work, although leapfrogging is perhaps a better analogy, as connections are often present between non-adjacent movements. Although listeners may not necessarily experience something as deep as Schenker's *Ursatz*, an underlying web of connections is present, although it is contingent upon their musical memory. The potential for cross-reference and repetition gives rise to the possibility for coherence that is neither wholly linear nor entirely top-down. Moments are linked together through recollection and, if we listen to a work multiple times, through forward projection too. Every moment is in itself important, whilst relying on those that come before and after it to give coherence. A listener must construct their own mental image of a work based on the relationship

between these moments—whether adjacent or not—and in so doing, the importance of time and linearity is challenged. This music is, in a sense, timeless. This is a useful idea in relation to fragments, with its logical extreme being Stockhausen's concept of moment-form:

The moments are not merely consequents of what precedes them and antecedents of what follows; rather the concentration is on the Now—on every Now—as if it were a vertical slice dominating over any horizontal conception of time and reaching into timelessness, which I call eternity: an eternity which does not begin at the end of time, but is attainable at every moment.

(quoted in Griffiths, [1995](#)Griffiths, P. (1995). *Modern music and after*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., pp. 144–145)

Moment-form shows a concern more with the independence of singular moments than any connections between them. This usefully informs how the fragment work may operate, but whilst it may function in isolation, it is strengthened when it forms a meaningful part of a whole: it is only a fragment if it has the potential to complete or unify something. Metzger, through Maurice Blanchot, dismisses the issue of unity as commonplace, too obvious a question to ask, which ‘betray[s] our allegiance to the whole and to the values of unity’ ([2011](#)Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 127). Whilst it is useful to consider fragment works without recourse to these accepted notions, their relevance can form a crucial part of how a work is heard. Metzger's discussion of the term is chiefly related to continuity, or linear development, and to search only for links between adjacent sections in such a work may be unhelpful. It must be considered whether fragments can be understood more readily by combining modes of thinking and by identifying factors which connect movements in spite of time: leapfrogging between moments and weaving a web of connections are two ideas to keep in mind, whilst the importance memory plays in constructing meaning must not be forgotten.

Kurtág's Fragments

Kurtág's relationship with brevity can be explained through biographical, social or cultural narratives, but each has limitations. Williams ([1999](#)Williams, A. E. (1999). The literary sources for Kurtág's fragment form. *Contemporary Music Review*, 18(2), 141–150. doi:10.1080/07494469900640241. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), pp. 141–150) highlights the importance of the intrinsically succinct Hungarian language and the concision found in its poetry, observing the ‘internal balancing of opposites’ (p. 144) which can similarly be found in the structures of Kurtág's music. Brevity can also be traced back to the composer's early association with the music of Webern⁵ During his time in Paris (1957–1958), Kurtág laboriously and lovingly copied Webern's works by hand: see Beckles Willson ([2004](#)Beckles Willson, R. (2004). *György Kurtág: The sayings of Péter Bornemisza, Op. 7, A ‘concerto’ for soprano and piano*. Aldershot: Ashgate., p. 32). [View all notes](#)—though Williams questions this, citing literary origins instead—whilst others demonstrate the significance of more directly musical factors (see Walsh, [1982](#)Walsh, S. (1982). György Kurtág: An outline study (1). *Tempo* (New Series), 140, 11–21. doi:10.1017/S0040298200035415. [\[CrossRef\]](#), pp. 11–21). Whether biographically related or not, there is a distinct musical difference. Where Webern sought compact but complete structures, Kurtág uses individual movements to create singular musical thoughts, fragments that simultaneously act alone and form part of a larger whole. Questions of formal coherence arise: do these fragments join together to create a whole (the piece), or are they individual beginnings, brief glimpses into a multitude of other worlds, or even a series of false starts? Whichever is the case, the manner in which Kurtág reconciles the notion of fragment with large-scale form is worth exploring. This form may be best understood removed from notions of linearity and reliant more on memory and the retrospective construction of meaning.

Kurtág shows a propensity for the miniature in many works, but it is one which deals with time at both the micro and macro level which is to be examined here. Written for soprano and violin in forty movements, the *Kafka Fragments* represent the extremes of Kurtág's treatment of timescale. At an hour, this is his longest work to date, but uses a larger number of individual movements than any other. From the shortest fragment at around fourteen seconds, to the longest at seven minutes, the manipulation of time is an important factor and is intrinsically linked to the idea of (dis-)continuity.

Destination, Path, Hesitation: Issues of Scale, Structure and Time

There is a destination, but no path to it;

what we call a path is hesitation. (*Kafka Fragments*, 3.6)

The closed circle is pure. (*Kafka Fragments*, 3.7)

The above texts come from adjacent movements of the *Kafka Fragments* and demonstrate two possible interpretations of the work's structure. The hesitation of 3.6⁶ Movements are referred to in the form section.movement within section (3.6: sixth mvt. of section 3).[View all notes](#) could be that of the composer: unable to create a single, flowing work, he stumbles as he starts each movement, leaving only a series of fragments. The destination—the end of the work—is present, but there is 'no path to it': we may travel from movement to movement, but the route itself is meaningless. 'The closed circle is pure' provides an altogether different interpretation: the work is indeed unified, moreover it is a circle generated from the ever-changing direction of its movements, and requires a definite journey. These texts are found in adjacent movements placed, rather conspicuously, at the centre of the piece. The silence between them has the potential to mark the exact midpoint, as it does in Juliane Banse and András Keller's definitive ECM recording ([2006](#)Banse, J., & Keller, A. (2006). *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* [CD]. London: ECM.).²⁷ 3.6 finishes 29'42" in, leaving 3.7 to start the remaining 29'38" (Banse & Keller, [2006](#)Banse, J., & Keller, A. (2006). *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* [CD]. London: ECM. [CD]).[View all notes](#)Appropriately, as Griffiths ([2006](#)Griffiths, P. (2006). Liner notes to *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* [Recorded by Juliane Banse & András Keller] (pp. 14–17). London: ECM., p. 14) points out in his accompanying liner notes, 'The closed circle' (3.7) was also the last fragment to be completed.

The opposing ideas of fragmentation—parts of *the* whole, or many parts of *different* wholes—lead one to view the work in these terms, and is therefore of interest when attempting to find which interpretation is more fruitful. Does the division of music into such small units require a linear interpretation, or a reading that is less time-bound? Taking the most basic measure, the individual duration of movements,⁸ All durations come from Banse and Keller ([2006](#)Banse, J., & Keller, A. (2006). *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* [CD]. London: ECM.). This thorough interpretation, supervised by the composer, seems the most accurate representation of the composer's intentions and provides data relating to duration in seconds and minutes, which the score cannot.[View all notes](#) it is possible to map out the structure in two different ways, reflecting these interpretations. [Figure 1](#) represents the work in terms of a continuous circle, running clockwise with movements as proportional segments, whilst [Figure 2](#) compares the relative length of movements, considering each as a fragment in its own right.

Figure 1 Movements as Fragments of the Whole (Relative Durations)—'The Closed Circle is Pure'.

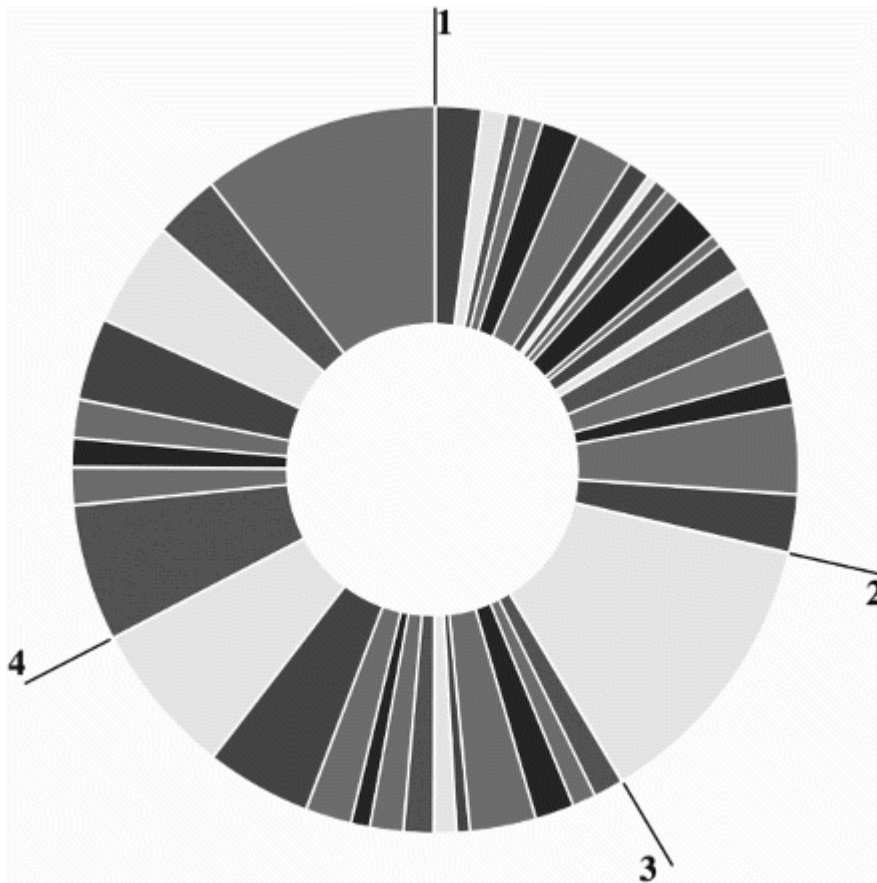
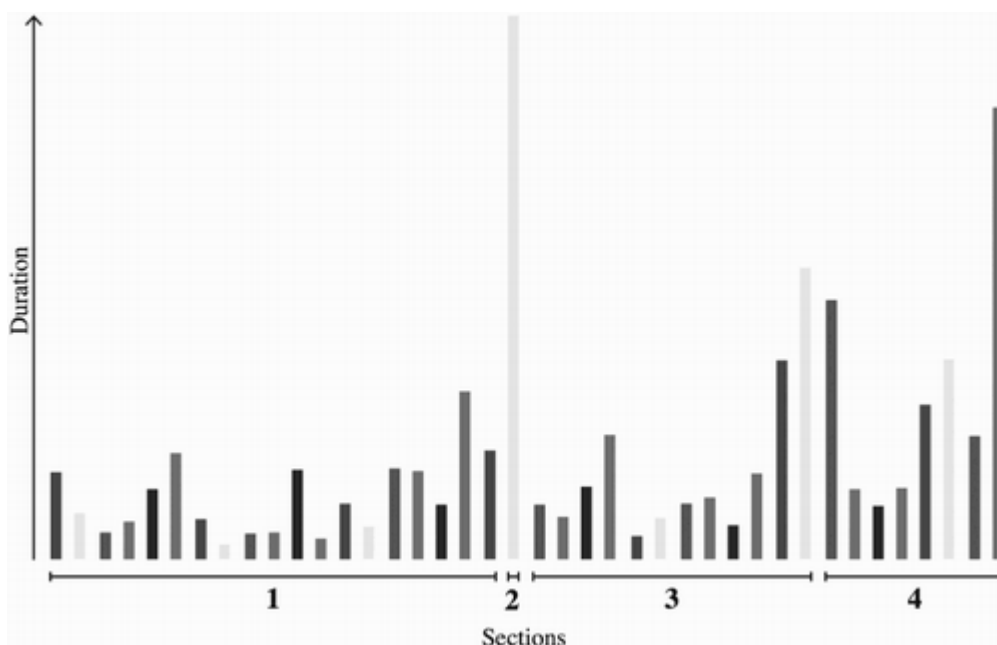


Figure 2 Movements as Disparate Fragments (Relative Durations)—‘There is a Destination, but no Path to It’.

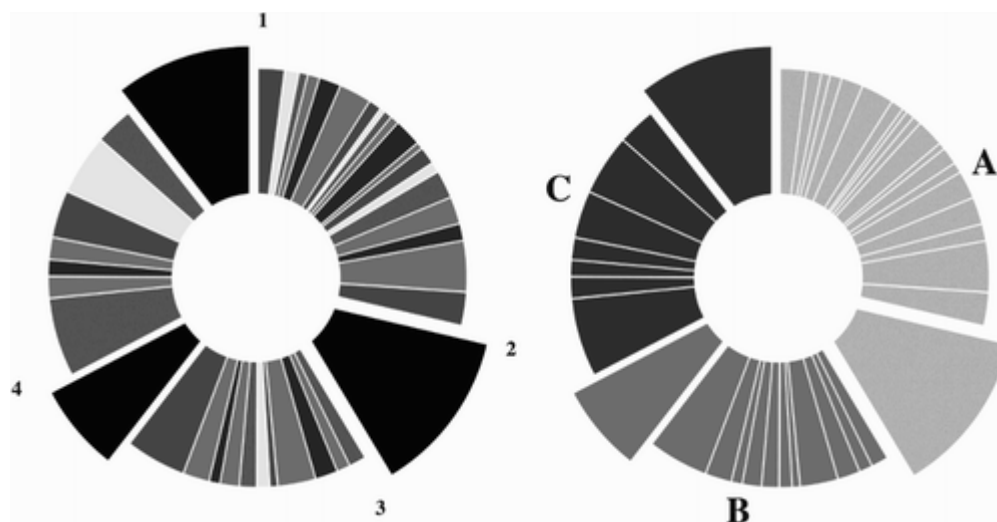


Whilst the majority are relatively consistent in duration, several appear inexplicably long. [Figure 1](#) shows two concentrations of short movements in the first and third sections, between which lie the single-movement second section and the fourth, which has fewer but longer movements than the first. This structure exhibits a balance of opposites typical of Kurtág's playful use of ideas: the longest movement makes up the smallest section (2), and the longest section (4) is made from

comparatively few fragments.⁹ This balance of opposites is similarly found in the Hungarian language and its literature (see Williams, 1999 Williams, A. E. (1999). The literary sources for Kurtág's fragment form. *Contemporary Music Review*, 18(2), 141–150. doi:10.1080/07494469900640241. [Taylor & Francis Online], pp. 141–150).[View all notes](#)

There is clearly an overarching shape uniting Kurtág's fragmented whole; furthermore, the longest movements are positioned at focal points, dividing the piece into manageable, coherent sections. The placement of fragments in order to articulate musical time is a fundamental concept in the piece, and these three act as musical keystones. Just as an architectural keystone is placed at the apex of an arch, so these are found at the structural peaks of the work, acting as interfaces between larger sections. They bridge gaps between parts and give time in which a listener may more fully absorb the preceding fragmentary music. More than simply standing out as longer movements, they also have distinct profiles which differentiate them from their surroundings: 2.1 is obsessively focussed on its singular, unchanging theme; 3.12 is a collection of interlinked miniatures; 4.8 shows a coming together of characters, as melismatic virtuosity in the voice mixes with the violin's melodically-charged display. These keystone movements join their preceding collections of fragments to create three overall sections—A, B and C (see [Figure 3](#))—which will subsequently be referred to in preference to Kurtág's own four-part structure.

Figure 3 Keystone Movements and Three Sections in *Kafka Fragments*.



These two levels of segmentation—into 40 fragments and into three sections—demonstrate a relatively consistent approach to balance. As [Figure 4](#) demonstrates, the keystone movements of A and C each amount to just under a third of their relative section, whilst B uses something closer to a quarter. However, the approximate ratio of 7:3 permeates other structural elements: the ratio of fragmented movements to keystone movements reflects this ([Figure 5](#)), whilst the entire work is divided at the two-thirds point by the start of section C ([Figure 6](#)). This nesting of proportions is even more pronounced in sections B and C, both of which take up the same relative part of the whole work as their keystones do of them.

Figure 4 Internal Balance of Structural Sections in *Kafka Fragments* (Relative Durations).

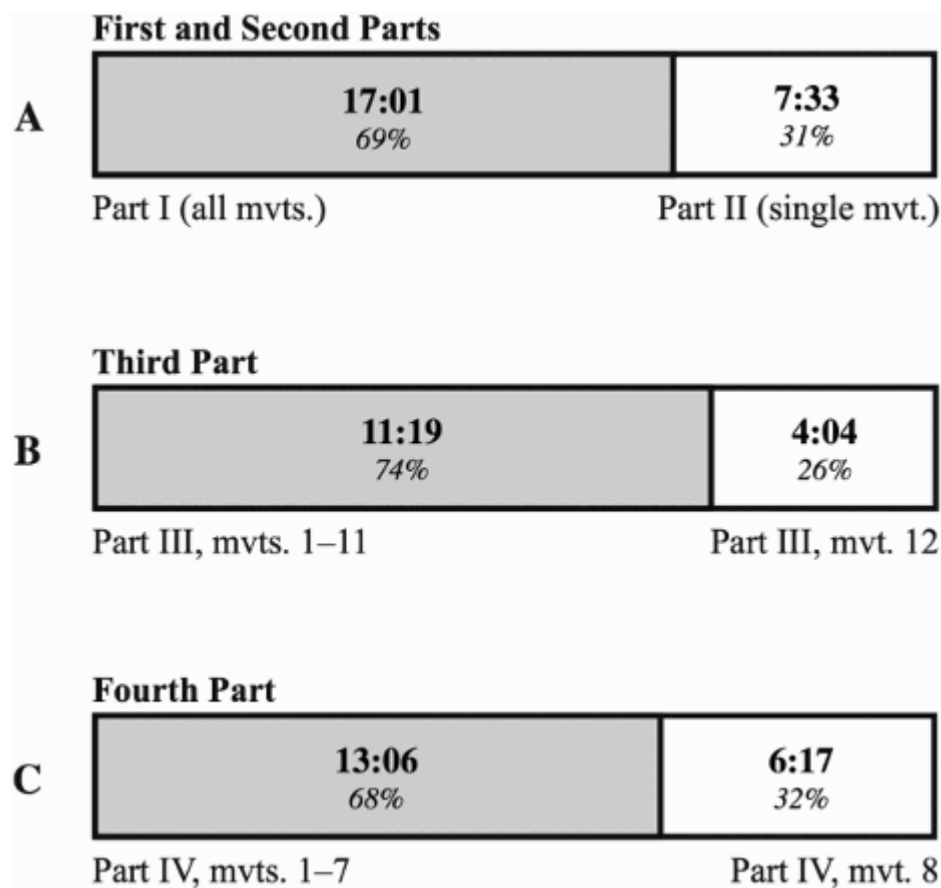


Figure 5 Aggregate Balance of Fragment and Keystone Movements in *Kafka Fragments* (Relative Durations).

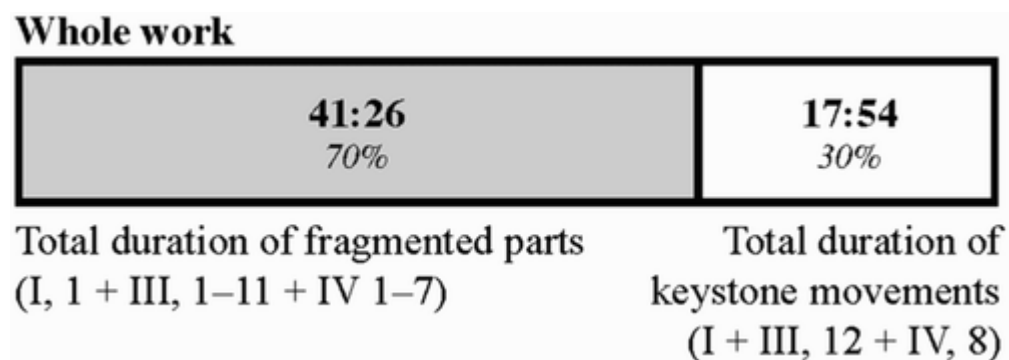
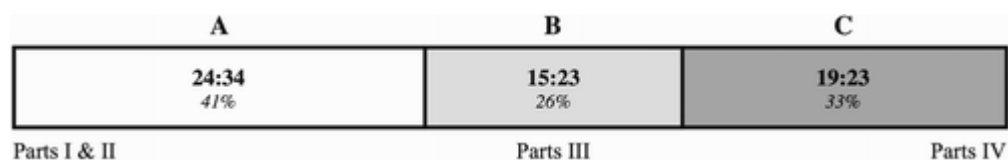


Figure 6 Balance of Structural Sections Across *Kafka Fragments* (Relative Durations).



These divisions of the *Kafka Fragments* at varying levels, demonstrates a consistent and cohesive approach to structure. On a scale above individual fragments, there are three substantial sections—A, B and C—and the work can be seen as a piece of pieces at every level, something which subsequent issues will highlight further. This structural reading operates well in the surface-depth paradigm, with the keystone movements acting as tangible dividers which help us to understand the large scale whilst also appreciating the ‘here and now’ of the fragments. There is some degree of

reconciliation between Fink, Levinson, and Schenker as the large scale is reflected in the small scale: we leap from fragment to fragment, but Kurtág has left signposts to help us along the way.

Themes and Variations: Issues of Continuity and Consistency

The diary entry dates that appear at the end of each of the *Kafka Fragments*' movements demonstrate that they have been composed in one order and put together in another. Whilst they may have originated as disconnected episodes, their deliberate arrangement suggests a consideration for thematic continuity and musical coherence. Nevertheless, thematic ideas are difficult to account for, with adjacent movements presenting high, sometimes outrageous, degrees of contrast. Instead, at the heart of the work is a series of musical factors rather than strict themes that bring the fragments together. These give moment-to-moment continuity whilst also lending an overall thematic consistency that relies on a listener's memory to form connections. These prevalent notions are:

- the interval of a fifth;
- purity and impurity;
- chromaticism;
- stark contrast.

The fifth acts not to differentiate themes and sections with tonics and dominants, but functions as an independent unit, appearing both melodically and harmonically across the work. In 1.5, 'Berceuse I', the C-G fifth acts as a tonal centre at the opening, itself deriving from the plagal cadence (F to C) of the preceding movement. The central section sees the violin play two contrapuntal lines, a melody given to each of its lower strings, as the fifth is broken down. The only overlapping pitch in this section of counterpoint is the recurrent D#, acting as a cadential link from C (minor) to the open string of (G–D) which finish the piece, although the purity is somewhat disrupted by the voice holding on to the C in the final bars. The open fifths of the violin represent an even more fundamental stability, which listener and performer alike can hold on to. This is demonstrated in this example and throughout the work, giving the pitches G, D, A and E the role of rhetorical 'tonic'.

Taking purity as associated with the fifth, when this interval is corrupted the idea of impurity is not far behind. Immediately preceding 'Berceuse I' is a movement, the most part for solo violin, given the direction 'With a strident, choked sounds—the second clashes screaming, but even the octaves and unison unpleasantly out of key' (Kurtág, [1987](#) Kurtág, G. (1987). *Kafka-Fragmente*, Op. 24 (score). Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest., p. 4). This sort of impurity related to tuning is present at various points in the work, most notably in 2.1 where the violin plays in constant *legatissimo* two-part counterpoint (on the G and D strings, as before), each line moving by almost constant quarter-tone steps. Here, the notion of impurity is taken on so wholeheartedly and for such a long period that it could become normalised to a listener, itself becoming pure. It is only the well-tempered voice part that places the violin in context. The notion of purity explains other harmonic and melodic aspects of the piece: the fifth is often altered to give diminished fifths and minor sixths, and as the tonality becomes more dissonant, there is a sense of a move towards impurity, the stable fifths acting as an anchor to call the music back. This to-and-fro from purity, consonance and the fifth, to impurity, dissonance and the tritone, creates both continuity and change between fragments, giving consistency and a sense of narrative.

Often juxtaposed with the fifth is the use of chromaticism, a characteristic that pervades the work. Noteworthy is the occasional use of a complete chromatic scale. In two adjacent movements,

Kurtág's different approaches to chromaticism and purity can be seen most markedly. In 1.4, the impurity of the 'unpleasantly out of key' violin is matched by the conspicuous use throughout of two descending and intertwining chromatic scales, which in turn give rise to vertical (out of tune) unisons and minor seconds. This is prefigured in the previous movement (1.3), which sees the chromatic scale far more veiled: appropriate, given the movement's title, 'Hiding Places'. The violin plays a downward chromatic scale, coloured by wild octave-displacement and irregular rhythms, whilst the voice oscillates around smaller clusters, infilling chromatic wedges. Fifths play a part, but even they spell out a chromatic line. These two examples of Kurtág's use of essentially the same theme, demonstrate playfulness in his approach. Two adjacent movements use the same material yet end up with completely different music. In doing this there is a simultaneous engagement with continuity and fragmentation, and whilst movements may sound starkly contrasting, there are often underlying themes linking them from one to the next and as a whole.

Continuity through Connections

The fragmentary nature of the work is a continual reminder that it is split into tightly-controlled units; however, the aural result is often rather continuous. Kurtág conjures an idiosyncratic soundworld that remains relatively consistent throughout *Kafka Fragments*, various recurring harmonic patterns creating an overall sonority related to the thematic principles explored above. Whilst the work is not wholly consonant, neither is it consistently dissonant: it can be understood in terms of chromatically-inflected consonance, with dissonance often arising as a by-product of other processes. These processes and related sonorities are found throughout the work, giving it sonic consistency.

Fifths and fourths are stacked or nested to create chords with a dissonant surface, but an underpinning consonant principle; they are also used horizontally, creating chains of consonances separated by non-harmonic spacing. This technique is used with other intervals, and one can observe many major-minor third harmonies and melodies, giving rise to [0,1,4] sonorities—the crystalline opening of 1.11 spelling this out as a beautiful and familiar-sounding melody. This technique stems from ideas of stacking, nesting and pivotal pitches, as if the harmony is a by-product of the working out of a problem—a facet of Kurtág's fragments highlighted by Metzger (2011) Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 128). There are an abundance of specific sonorities related to this: the [0,1,4] collection is ever-present; the stacked thirds of augmented chords [0,4,8]; and the fusion of these in minor major-seventh chords [0,1,4,8]. Other common sounds include further seventh chords, superimposed diatonic scales, and the fragmented lydian mode. The harmonic language can be seen in terms of the manipulation and juxtaposition of consonances, demonstrating that the fundamental building blocks of this music are often the same, the departure point for the fragments residing in a select collection of harmonic and melodic concerns. The effect of this is to create a timeless quality, as the division into multiple fragments is challenged by sonic—even harmonic—unity, the music being tied together by its essentially homogeneous source.

Recurrent Contrasts

Whilst the whole work has a relatively consistent harmonic and melodic language, the very different moods and styles of movements do provide some varied interconnections, which produce links across temporally-disjointed fragments and manifest themselves in a series of opposing notions:

- light-hearted versus serious;

- naive versus complex;
- shrouded versus transparent;
- chromatically-inflected versus tonally led;
- singular moment versus miniaturised form.

Whilst these are not mutually exclusive or totally clear-cut, they do show connections across the work which provide an undulating emotional and sonic path, and lend a sense of familiarity that is built up as the piece progresses and themes recur. As the work moves forward, the aggregate of fragments begin to assemble themselves into these groups in the mind's ear, becoming increasingly recognisable on repeated hearings. Once again it is up to the listener to create meaning through recollection, and whilst this process is facilitated through linear progression, it is not dependent on it: a listener's assembling of connections is not time-bound but timeless.

The first three of these oppositions are closely linked, although quite distinct. Aside from the text, one can observe commonalities that make a movement light-hearted: simplistic musical language, playful treatment of material, or even mimicking a style (the mock-waltz of 1.7 and the violin's unsophisticated octave Gs in 1.9 being good examples). Serious movements, on the other hand, show a higher level of emotional investment in the musical material and less patent absurdity. The idea of naivety can be seen in movements that are light-hearted or serious, and relates more to musical material than mood: 4.6 is musically naive but emotionally loaded compared to the more thematically complex 4.8. Connected to this is the idea of shrouding and transparency. The contrast of 1.3 and 1.4 demonstrates this aptly, as both movements use a descending chromatic scale as a starting point: whilst 1.4 makes no secret of this—its lines being wholly chromatic and audibly so—1.3 hides it with octave displacements and interruptions. They both display adherence to a simple musical idea, but each demonstrates a different approach to it: two adjacent movements appear to contrast but are unarguably connected.

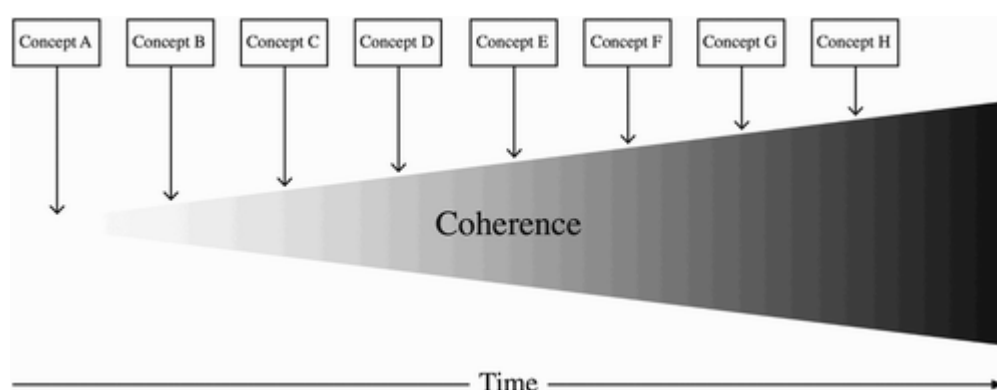
The aural effect of some movements is clearly more tonal than others, and whilst the likely pairing of tonality with naivety, and chromaticism with complexity is often seen, these ideas do not always work in tandem. Consonance can give a fragment its overall sonic landscape or simply lend a momentary point of clarity. In both cases it provides a foreground (moment-to-moment) point of reflection in a similar way to that provided on a background level by the keystone movements. Some fragments display formal coherence through the arrangement of contrasting material into meaningful structures, whilst others take a single idea and utilise it throughout, often ending in the most aphoristic music. The contrast of these two types of movement is crucial to the work, and their careful balancing prevents it from becoming incomprehensibly fragmented: Kurtág never places too many 'single-moment' movements in close proximity, giving them more significance when they do appear, lending emotional weight and large-scale structural importance.

Aside from these specific contrasts, there are other common features. The violin and voice often move between states of unity and separation, alternately mimicking or opposing each other. This happens on a movement-to-movement basis, but more common is the tendency to move between these different states within a fragment, often starting with something unified, before developing it into more distinct parts. A common structure of introduction (together)—development (apart)—coda (violin) is established and returned to throughout the work. A similar form is the alternation of material types, either as a simple binary structure, or as a regular alternation of motifs as in 1.19. These forms give familiarity as the work progresses, the composition gradually setting its own rules

and establishing self-serving precedents and archetypes. The potential for a unified musical experience increases over time.

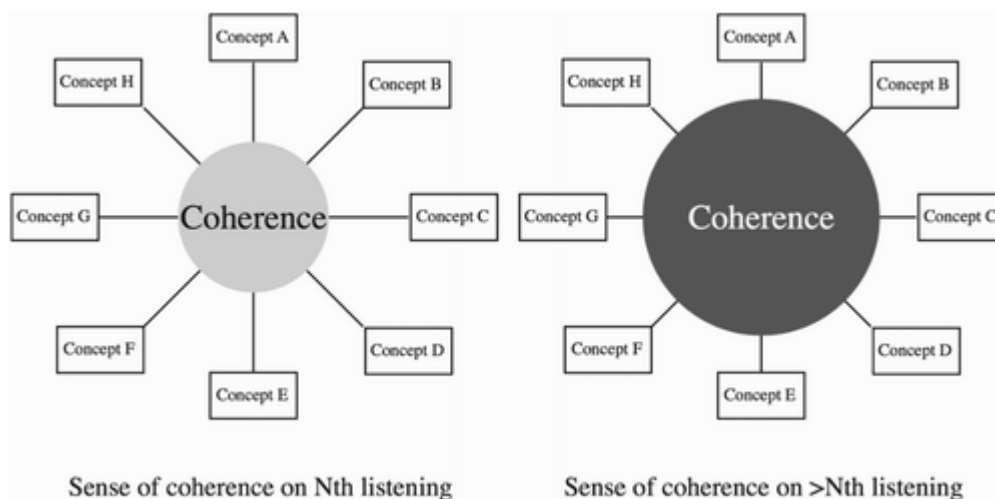
The variety of recurrent sonorities, the array of compositional notions, and the other factors explored here, reveal a piece which operates by creating connections that have little to do with a linear conception of form. Fragments are linked via underlying networks, forming connections that are only readily perceived from a distance and with memory playing a crucial role. To piece together the parts of this jigsaw, we need to view them from afar to see connecting patterns and themes. The work is probably best absorbed if we can accept the active role we—and our memory—must play in retrospectively piecing it together; however, with Fink and Levinson's ideas in mind, the linearity of the work cannot be avoided. Placing our understanding of the interconnections alongside a linear perception may lead to the perceptual model shown in [Figure 7](#), which represents the variety of concepts that we take from successive fragments feeding into a sense of increasing coherence.

Figure 7 Temporal Accretion of Coherence.



As movements go past they inform our reception by contributing something to our perceptual framework: we hear a structure in one movement that is reworked in another, the same gesture is used again, a compositional notion becomes increasingly prevalent. As we take more of these repeating ideas on board, it is possible to reflect on what we have heard with a little more sense: a fragment's place in the image becomes clear once we start to see the bigger picture. This process is contingent on time to let the ideas unfold and repeat, but not on linearity as we are required to recall concepts which may be temporally disjointed. With multiple hearings, a similar process takes place. A glazier restoring a window by placing fragments of stained glass back together will make more sense of the overall picture every time they go over it, on each occasion putting more fragments in place to make the overall picture more intelligible. Each time we listen, we can take a notional step back, hear the larger connections and make more sense of the overall form ([Figure 8](#)).

Figure 8 Accretion of Coherence with Multiple Hearings.




Horizontal Consistencies


Section A: Pacing and Tonal Centres


The three large sections (set out in [Figure 3](#)) show horizontal consistency, and whilst section A demonstrates the highest level of fragmentation, it remains coherent throughout. This coherence comes from subsections of thematically-linked movements, which are more readily taken on board in their groupings than as individual fragments.


Section A can be split into three subsections based on a combination of unifying tonal centres and longer ‘sub-keystone’ movements. Continuity between the first five fragments is achieved with a consistent tonal centre of C, as [Figure 9](#) shows. The sixth movement—the longest thus far—acts as a moment of repose in which two notes form a motif that gradually grows to encompass all twelve pitches. A full-stop-like pizzicato B \flat in unison with the voice acts to end this section before the second, which uses much the same technique, now centred on G ([Figure 10](#)). This similarly culminates in a reflective movement, the beautifully transparent 1.11.

Figure 9 Horizontal Tonal Connections in *Kafka Fragments* 1.1–1.5 (Excerpts copyright by Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by Permission).

1.1  C-D ostinato throughout
mp, indifferente al fine

1.2  Scalic patterns starting on C
Ends with gliss. to high C
sempre poco rinf. [quasi presto]

1.3  C sets off displaced chromatic scale
Ends on G# centre
col legno, battuto
ppp, naccatissimo

1.4  Takes G# centre and starts chromatic scale passage
Ends on plagal cadence in C
f
tutta forza




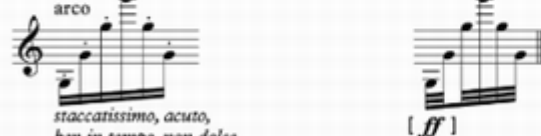
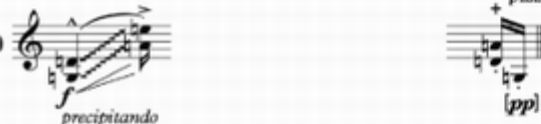
1.5  C-G starts off
C held over G (V⁴ or I⁹)
p
pp ma pesante

Figure 10 Horizontal Tonal Connections in *Kafka Fragments* 1.7–1.10 (Excerpts copyright by Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by Permission).

1.7  C tonality
Ambiguous tonal centre ending away from G and C
mp

1.8  G sets off chromatic line
G# more prominent by end
pp
pizz.
mf
fff

1.9  Octave Gs throughout
Higher rhythmic intensity by end
arco
staccatissimo, acuto,
ben in tempo, non dolce
[ff]

1.10  G-D fifths sets off series of glissandi
Fifths and open G at end
f
precipitando
pizz.
[pp]

The use of structural tonal centres and secondary keystone movements is a persuasive formal construction, but, typical of the piece, the pattern is not replicated to the same extent elsewhere. The image of completeness that this extract paints is subverted by the lack of its repetition, yet it provides a strong example of Kurtág's manipulation of the perceived flow of time. The composer gives the listener time enough to feel the connections, but swiftly moves events in a new direction: it is fragmented even in its unity.

Section B: Towards De-Fragmentation

In section B there is a shift away from the single-idea aphorisms that appear earlier in the work and towards relatively extensive movements with more involved forms. The sense of contrast is achieved by a considered and conspicuous balancing of parts, and although there is no clear-cut formula, present is a general oscillation between calm, tonally leaning fragments (3.1, 3.3, 3.6, 3.8, 3.10, 3.11) and more terse, chromatically-intense ones. Furthermore, occasional short, monothematic fragments act as moments of repose, serving a similar function to that of the keystone movements on the larger scale, and the longer movements in section A. 3.5 is indeed a reworking of one of these movements (1.11), using the same text and taking the same musical material but contracting it, moving from the expansive transparency of its first incarnation to this terse and fragmented punctuation mark. This role reversal demonstrates a change in the treatment of fragments, as longer movements become more common and the utterly fragmentary become the markers of structure. We see the final truly miniaturised movements further on (3.5 and 3.9), dividing section B into two subsections: 3.1–3.5 and 3.6–3.9. These are followed by a group of three longer fragments, growing in duration until the final movement of the section—the second large-scale keystone of the work. In this, musical ideas interact in a manner unlike anything before, as a strident folk-like melody emerges, interspersed with passages of developmental material. From this point onwards, movements take on a new character, the final one of section B having acted as an agent for change, a pivot from which a new direction is explored. The three adjacent long fragments of 3.11, 3.12 and 4.1, balance the disproportionately extensive first keystone (2.1) and herald the large-scale coda of the work: a section which gives new ideas and brings together old.

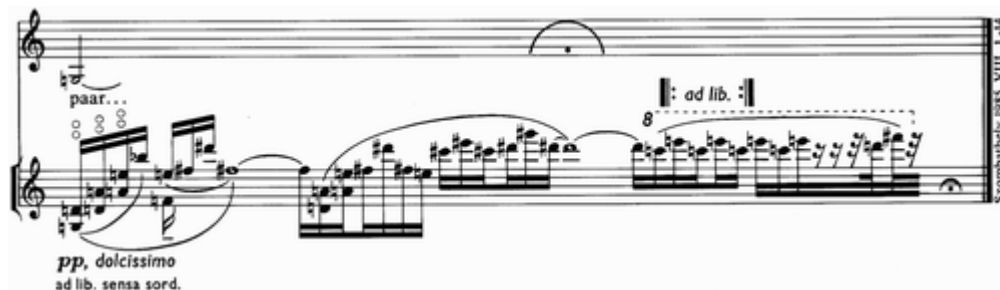
Section C: Summing Up

The fragments of section C display a higher degree of self-contained completeness than any others in the work. After the first long movement in this section, the three shortest ones are presented side-by-side. They act as a bridge, each still brief enough to seem fragmentary and retain the contrasts of the preceding music: 4.2 is whimsical; 4.3, rhythmic and simple; 4.4, fleeting and highly chromatic. The last of these introduces the concept of additive development whereby a motif is gradually repeated and augmented to spin a simple idea organically. This is presented transparently in the subsequent movements, each of which contains an unprecedented degree of repetition and organic development. With its winding gestures highly reminiscent of Bartók, 4.6 seems conclusive as it brings together the two parts in the most lyrical fragment of the work, the violin imitating the voice in a naive melody that gives the impression of a musical dictation, someone reading back a diary entry. The last movement reverses this dialogue, as the soprano utilises the most extensive melismatic phrasing of the work, copying the violin as it goes, letting the two parts become one. In this final keystone there is a singular focus, as the two protagonists, so closely entwined, move through some of the most virtuosic material of the piece, before the energy is wound down towards the end.

The combination of the final three fragments gives a satisfying conclusion, but whilst ends are certainly tied up, the final gesture calls for more music: a repeat of the opening, the organic

development now reversed to leave a major third dyad hanging at the top of the violin's register. The voice is given the resonance of the violin's G string, whilst the violin itself reaches stratospheric heights, finishing with a question mark rather than a full stop ([Figure 11](#)).

Figure 11 *Kafka Fragments*, 4.8 Final Gesture (Copyright by Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by Permission).



The Bigger Picture

The three sections demonstrate distinct contrast in their treatment of time. The themes and ideas that tie the work together in a nonlinear, timeless fashion are less important here as continuity is established in different ways, each section subverting the idea of fragmentation and bringing together seemingly insubstantial movements to create convincing, kinetic narratives. Time is at once divided and united by the movement-to-movement changes, which have facets of both unity and disunity: we are aware of segmentation whilst also feeling continuity. Kurtág conjures music that is far more than the sum of its parts, but this is music that is not afraid to show these parts or indeed the way in which they are brought together. It remains fragmented, but the result is a larger picture rather than individual pieces.

And so the fragments are somewhat complete, but not satisfactorily concluded. That the texts are extracts, fragments of a writer's life, means that each movement is a window into something larger, something where an outsider can never get the full picture. With each successive movement the picture is made clearer and so as the *Kafka Fragments* progresses, one's understanding of its methods increase, and its coherence becomes increasingly comprehensible. It is a series of snapshots, but snapshots chosen to shed the most light on a notional whole and which retain sufficient connections to give at least a partially clear picture. These are fragments of both this notional whole and of separate parts, like a mosaic they come together to provide something new whilst giving hints at their variety of sources.

Piecing Together the Fragments

Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* is clearly a work in small segments. As explored, these snippets of music can be seen as fragments as distinct from miniatures, and for the most part we find the composer does not deal with miniaturisation in a Webernian sense; this work is an hour long. This in itself does not present a problem, but there is certainly something unusual in this combination of small and large scale, and if we view this piece as dramatic, theatrical, or even quasi-operatic, we should confront how time is divided and how progression through time (dramatic or musical) is achieved. There is a narrative here that draws us into and along with the music.

The above analysis has shown that, despite its splinteredness, the work demonstrates a high degree of continuity, and a treatment of time and pacing that belies its construction from fragments. This continuity comes from the aggregation of small elements into large sections, and the division of these into smaller subsections. The proportions of these sections show a sensitivity to formal

balance that matches a perception of the entire piece as congruous and flowing, whilst localised connections allow groups of movements to flow together without entirely showing their fractured construction. Despite these agents of horizontal continuity, however, there is further detail that demonstrates that this music is constructed from fragments. Movements from across the work share the variety of themes, ideas and oppositions explored above as if they have been splintered from these original sets of ideas, before being rearranged in a way that camouflages their connectedness. The result is a criss-crossing of ideas that brings temporally-dislocated movements together. These recur as the piece progresses, resulting in a gradual accretion of coherence as we listen that, whilst being dependent on the unfolding of time, is not tied to horizontal progression. These connections are timeless and independent of the music's progress, yet they manage to create continuity whilst also highlighting the work's origin as fragments.

It is the careful structure and the arrangement of fragments that gives the *Kafka Fragments* a meaningful level of continuity, and enables it to occupy an hour without constantly evidencing how this time is divided. Temporal and atemporal continuities allow the work to function effectively, bringing the large and small together: it may be useful to consider a visual analogy to clarify this. Like a piece of stained glass, this music is made up of fragments which, whilst functioning as standalone elements, derive meaning from their arrangement; however, this is not a new window, and things are not clear. Kurtág gives us just enough fragmented material to make sense of the notional whole. Tiny snippets of music make sense when a pivotal movement is added and, like the restoration of old glass, a crucial fragment will give meaning to the surviving panels around it. The fragments are those of an overall picture, and as they are added to over time, the overall image becomes clearer. We do not see the full picture, but present in these fragments is all the information necessary to understand it. The image may be incomplete, but the message is all there, creating a tension between unity and disunity that gives the music momentum. Each of the three sections of the *Kafka Fragments* (A, B and C) makes up its own fragmented musical panel, and each of these are tied together by the series of musical concerns explored earlier. Scale is of paramount importance, as we find varying levels of fragmentation and similar structures nested within each other. As a whole, each section—or panel—makes up a triptych, and through the detail we have gained at the foreground and middleground layers, we can make more sense of the background, the whole work.

Kafka Fragments is unified by the bigger pictures revealed by the relationships between sections at different scales, and whilst we may not fully grasp each movement as it passes by, we do get a sense of unity, or at least understanding, as the piece progresses. This is not an enigma, neither is its code completely breakable. It fully exists in the domain in which Kurtág places it: a series of fragments with all that such an idea entails.

Notes

1 Metzger writes of the disruption or reversal of a truth present in an aphoristic statement seen in movements of *Kafka Fragments* ([2011](#)Metzger, D. (2011). *Musical modernism at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 128).

2 Some modernist composers have taken this approach on board in their music: Taruskin comments, in relation to the Schenkerian method, 'composers trained to analyze that way might try to reconceptualize [the analysis] in composing' ([2005](#)Taruskin, R. (2005). *The Oxford history of western music* (Vol. 5). New York, NY: Oxford University Press., p. 512).

3 Taruskin provides a succinct explanation of these ideas, distilled from Levinson (2006).

4 Fink ([1999](#)Fink, R. (1999). Going flat: Post-hierarchical music theory and the musical surface. In N. Cook & M. Everist (Eds.), *Rethinking music* (pp. 102–137). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.) comments:

After tonality, a tonal surface, however well-behaved, can never again have the inevitability of ‘natural law’, and thus can never again give the impression of following necessarily from a single, fundamental, deep structure. (You can induce Pandora to close her box again—but I wouldn’t turn my back on her for a minute.) (p. 131)

5 During his time in Paris (1957–1958), Kurtág laboriously and lovingly copied Webern’s works by hand: see Beckles Willson ([2004](#)Beckles Willson, R. (2004). *György Kurtág: The sayings of Péter Bornemisza, Op. 7, A ‘concerto’ for soprano and piano*. Aldershot: Ashgate., p. 32).

6 Movements are referred to in the form section.movement within section (3.6: sixth mvt. of section 3).

7 3.6 finishes 29’42” in, leaving 3.7 to start the remaining 29’38” (Banse & Keller, [2006](#)Banse, J., & Keller, A. (2006). *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* [CD]. London: ECM. [CD]).

8 All durations come from Banse and Keller ([2006](#)Banse, J., & Keller, A. (2006). *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* [CD]. London: ECM.). This thorough interpretation, supervised by the composer, seems the most accurate representation of the composer’s intentions and provides data relating to duration in seconds and minutes, which the score cannot.

9 This balance of opposites is similarly found in the Hungarian language and its literature (see Williams, [1999](#)Williams, A. E. (1999). The literary sources for Kurtág’s fragment form. *Contemporary Music Review*, 18(2), 141–150. doi:10.1080/07494469900640241.[\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), pp. 141–150).